



If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them something more than the miracles of technology. We must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning . . .

—President Lyndon B. Johnson, upon signing the Wilderness Act, 1964

What Is Wilderness?

. . . an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man . . .

—Wilderness Act, 1964

Wilderness is a word of many meanings. From a place to be feared to a place to be revered, wilderness can evoke images of wild animals, cascading streams, jagged mountains, vast prairies, or deserts. For individuals wilderness can mean physical challenge, grand vistas, solitude, community, renewal, or respite from a complex technological society.

On September 3, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act. This law states: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recog-

nized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man . . .”

The word *untrammeled* captures the essence of wilderness. Simply put, *untrammeled* means “free of constraint” or “unhindered.” Wilderness areas are places where a conscious decision has been made by the American people to let nature prevail. In wilderness, natural processes are the primary force acting upon the land, and the developments of modern technological society are substantially unnoticeable.

An Enduring Resource

We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.

—Wallace Stegner

The Wilderness Act reached beyond defining wilderness. The goal of the Act was to preserve wilderness and the wilderness experience for future generations. But, why did Americans feel the need to preserve wilderness for future generations?

Citizens realized that even though wild lands were protected as a national park or national forest, humans could still affect the landscape in ways that diminished its natural qualities. The Wilderness Act was a response to public concern that wild areas be protected permanently by law, not subject to the discretion of agencies or administrations. This desire for permanent protection is heard in the opening words of the Wilderness Act. Congress declared: “In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States . . . leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”

The Wilderness Act protects not only the tangible resources of wilderness—habitat for wildlife, free-flowing streams, watersheds, biological diversity, cultural artifacts and historic structures—but also the intangible “benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”

The diverse benefits of wilderness vary according to the individual who contemplates wilderness or seeks a wilderness experience. Wilderness areas provide opportunities for physical and mental challenge, self-reliance, and solitude. As a haven from the pressures of modern society, wilderness can inspire personal renewal, artistic expression, and the opportunity to explore American heritage. Some people appreciate wilderness from afar, overlooking expansive vistas of wild lands from a roadside or simply by imagining wilderness areas in their minds.

Wilderness areas offer glimpses into the past and provide places to envision the future.